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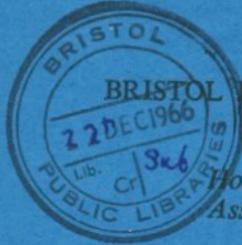
# EIGHTEENTH CENTURY VIEWS OF BRISTOL AND BRISTOLIANS

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BRISTOL BRANCH OF THE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION  
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This is the sixteenth pamphlet in a series issued by the Bristol Branch of the Historical Association through its Standing Committee on Local History. Its author is Associate Professor of History in California State College at San Bernardino. His thanks, and the thanks of the Bristol Branch of the Historical Association, are due to the Claremont Graduate School Research Fund which made a grant to help with cost of production; to the Clarendon Press for permission to quote from *George Sherburn's Correspondence with Alexander Pope*; to the Epsworth Press for permission to quote from John Telford's *The Letters of John Wesley*; and to the Yale University Press for permission to quote from *Horace Walpole's Correspondence*. Mr. Reece Winstone supplied the picture of the first American consulate in England; Messrs. Frost and Reed Ltd. allowed a photograph to be made of their print of the North-West View of Bristol; Miss Elizabeth Ralph supplied the illustration of the section of John Ogilby's road map; and Mr. Kevin Tindall photographed the print showing the approach to Bristol over Bristol Bridge.

The next pamphlet in the series will be a study by Mr. R. S. Mortimer of the early history of the Quakers in Bristol. The following are in an advanced stage of preparation: The Industrial Archaeology of Bristol by Dr. R. A. Buchanan, and Captain Thomas James and the North West Passage by Professor C. M. MacInnes.

Other titles under consideration include: Bristol Castle; the Blue Maids' Orphanage; the Anti-Slavery Movement in Bristol; the street names of Bristol; Bristol railways; and Sebastian Cabot. There will also be further pamphlets in the special series on the Port of Bristol.

The pamphlets enjoy a wide circulation. *The Bristol Hotwell* is now out of print, and the *Theatre Royal: the first seventy years* has gone into a second edition. The price has been kept as low as possible, but rising costs of printing and postage have made it necessary to raise the price to three shillings and there is some doubt whether this will be sufficient in the long run to cover costs.

The pamphlets may be obtained from most Bristol booksellers or direct from Mr. Peter Harris, 74, Bell Barn Road, Stoke Bishop, Bristol, 9. Details of earlier publications are given at the back of this pamphlet. The Branch hopes that readers will help its work by placing standing orders for future productions.

Books of travel, guide books, and descriptive accounts of the world and its various parts were enormously popular in the eighteenth century. Perhaps the influence of Pierre Bayle and the sceptics or the new scientific interests which made the world at once larger and smaller engendered this popularity. But whatever the cause, the inquiring reader could choose from a great abundance of printed materials to satisfy his curiosity about the world. Daniel Defoe whose *Tour Thro' the Whole Island of Great Britain* underwent seven revisions by different editors in the eighteenth century was among the most perceptive of the writers. His particular work, like Thomas Cox's revision of *Magna Britannia*, was further complemented by plagiarists who freely gleaned from its pages in an age during which appropriation was as common as original writing. Though much of this material was not original—even Defoe and Cox were plagiarists—and some of it quite inaccurate, this did not in any way hinder its popularity, and Bristol readers were not immune to its attractions. The early records of the Bristol Literary Society reveal that the two books most often borrowed were books of travel. And as Bristolians were interested in the rest of the world, the rest of the world was interested in Bristol and Bristolians. Most of the major accounts and descriptions of England contained at least some mention of Bristol, although many authors were convinced that the city was part of Gloucester or of Somerset.

The purpose of this pamphlet is to try to determine what impressions were held of Bristol and Bristolians by their contemporaries in the eighteenth century. Materials published in the eighteenth century are the primary source, but contemporary private correspondence and diaries which have been subsequently published add an interesting perspective. In any case, it seems best to use the words of the writers and their editors whenever possible.

In the eighteenth century Bristol was first and foremost a city of trade and commerce. In fact, Daniel Defoe, the great novelist and essayist, noted of Bristol in the 1720's that it was "the greatest, the richest, and the best Port of Trade in Great Britain, London only excepted," and he continued:

The Merchants of the City not only have the greatest Trade, but they Trade with a more entire Independency upon London, than any other Town in Britain. And 'tis evident in this particular, (viz.) That whatsoever Exportations they make to any part of the World, they are able to bring the full returns back to their own Port, and can dispose of it there . . . .

But the Bristol Merchants as they have a very great Trade abroad, so they have always Buyers at Home, for their Returns, and that such Buyers at Home that no Cargo is too big for them. To this Purpose, the Shopkeepers in Bristol who in general are all Wholesale Men, have so great an inland Trade among all the Western Counties, that they maintain Carriers just as London Tradesmen do, to all the Principal Counties and Towns from Southampton in the South, even to the Banks of the Trent on the North; and Tho' they have no Navigable River that way, yet they drive a very great Trade through all those Counties.

Add to this, That as well by Sea, as by the Navigation of two great Rivers, the Wye and the Severn, They have the whole Trade of South Wales, as it were, to themselves, and the greatest Part of North Wales; and as to their Trade to Ireland, it is not only great in itself, but is prodigiosly encreas'd in these last Thirty Years, since the Revolution, notwithstanding the great Encrease and Encroachment of the Merchants at Liverpool, in the Irish Trade, and the great Devastations of the War; The Kingdom of Ireland it self being wonderfully encreas'd since this Time. (II, p. 435)

Bristol's predominance in trade was one of the factors which drew many visitors to the city. It should not be surprising, therefore, that many of them concerned themselves with this aspect of the city's life in their descriptions. Through much of the century, there was agreement among commentators concerning Bristol's position as second trading city in the kingdom as well. However, as the century wore on, there was a growing awareness that Bristol's position was being challenged.

John Aitkin, a writer about whom very little is known, described some of the changes which had taken place in the world of

industry by 1788 in a work entitled *England Delineated*, and the following quotation reveals Bristol's trade in more detail than did Defoe.

The manufacturers of this city and its vicinity furnish it with several important articles of exportation. The glass-making, in its several articles of crown, flint, and bottle glass, is very considerable and on the increase. Ireland and America take off great quantities of these goods, especially bottles, of which nearly half the number are sent out filled with beer, cyder, perry, and Bristol water. The copper and brass manufacturers were of capital importance, but are now much declined in consequence of a monopoly. Hard white soap, of the best quality, is made here in large quantities, much of which is sent to London, as well as to the colonies abroad. Hats, leather, both tanned and dressed in oil, saddlery and shoes white lead, gunpowder, and earthenware, are all considerable articles of domestic and foreign traffic. The city likewise possesses works for smelting lead and making lead shot, iron foundries, rolling and slitting mills, and the tin works, all which furnish very valuable commodities for exportation. Its former woollen manufactures are at an end.

Some of the principle commodities of the surrounding country, exported from Bristol, are, cheese, cyder, and beer, a few coals, herrings taken in the channel, salt from Droitwich, coarse woollens and stockings, hardware from Birmingham and Wolverhampton, and earthen-ware from Staffordshire. In the exportation of these last articles, however, Liverpool has gained upon Bristol, chiefly on account of the superiority of the canal navigations to that town, above the difficult and uncertain navigation of the Severn. (pp. 317-319)

This account by Aitkin is of interest for a number of reasons. It seems surprising that he does not mention the sugar houses and their products which supported one of the principal trades of Bristol. Nor did he mention the greatly diminished slave trade. He, however, did mention the glass manufacturers, and the sight of the glass houses proved intriguing to many of the contemporary visitors. One of the most thorough descriptions of these houses was made by a man styled simply as the "Irish Gentleman".

I saw many glass houses, with which this town vastly abounds, as the inhabitants reckon upwards of thirty. The generality of them are built of brick, taperwise to the top. Within side is the Chaldron wherein the metal is boiled, by which smoke is conveyed through the top . . . I saw several

things blown. This is performed by a long iron tube, the end of which they dip into the metal, and after they have given it a blast or two, they form or shape it into an anvil. (Huth, ed., *Journey*, p. 149)

Other interesting descriptions of local industries were also offered to the reader. Arthur Young who visited Bristol in the 1770's described the copper-works in great detail while the "Irish Gentleman" explained the workings of the lead smelting factory as well.

Another interesting point made by Aitkin was that Liverpool was encroaching on the trade of Bristol. This point was not generally noted even as late as 1788. But Aitkin went further than simply offering a tantalizing hint. He categorically stated that

Bristol, in wealth, trade, and population, has long been reckoned second to London within this Kingdom; and though the custom house receipts of Liverpool have for some time past exceeded those of Bristol, yet the latter may perhaps still maintain its place with respect to the opulence and number of its inhabitants. (pp. 314-315)

Aitkin was not without support in this observation, for David Macpherson also declared

There were entered inward this year (1765) at Bristol 384 British, and 47 foreign, vessels; and outward 319 British and 44 foreign.

In Liverpool there was entered inward 1738 British and 65 foreign, vessels; and outward 795 British and 70 foreign. . .

From these statements it appears, that Liverpool had gained greatly upon Bristol, and was henceforth to be considered as the second port in Britain, and the commercial capital of the West coast. (*Annals*, III, p. 432)

There was recognition, then, that Bristol had been eclipsed in regard to her overseas trade; however, the city remained the second largest in terms of population in the popular mind. Unrestrained by the facts which a general census might have provided — there was no official census until 1801 — the authors of the eighteenth century ordinarily over-estimated the population. Daniel Defoe wrote in the 1720's that "It is supposed they have an Hundred Thousand inhabitants in the City, and within three Miles of its Circumverance," (*Tour*, II, p. 437), while Benjamin Martin, an instrument maker and compiler, computed the houses at "13,000 and the souls at 95,000," (*History*, p. 75). Macpherson "perambulated it for two days, and from a near examination of the number of houses on a new foundation, and even of entire

new streets erected since the year 1751, he could not hesitate in concluding it to contain about 100,000 souls, or to be about the magnitude of that part of London which is contained within the antient walls." He continued;

It is confessed, that London, within the limited compass, appears to be more populous, or to have more people appearing in the streets; but that we apprehend to be occasioned chiefly by its communication with its vastly-extended suburbs, its immense commerce and shipping, the greater resort of foreigners, and the near residence of the court, nobility, gentry, and lawyers; whereas, in the streets of Bristol, which are more remote from harbour and shipping, the inhabitants are mostly either families, living on their means, or else manufacturers and workmen of many various kinds, employed mostly within doors. (*Annals*, III, p. 322-323)

There were others, however, who made more reliable estimates. William Cole, the Cambridge antiquarian who provided his friends with materials for histories and antiquarian books, numbered the houses of the seventeen Bristol parishes and the out-parish of St. Philips at 5,701 in 1735 (Cole MSS., B.M. Add. MSS. 5811: 87b). This, figure he pointed out, represented an increase of 1390 houses since his initial visit in 1712. Less convincingly he estimated the houses outside the confines of Bristol at approximately 1,000. Numbers of houses are, of course, not numbers of people, but they can help at arriving at approximate populations.

James Sketchley, a Bristol publisher, made a population count in his *Bristol Directory* of 1775. He calculated the number of houses, and multiplied that number by five and one-sixteenth. This figure was not without some foundation. He examined eighteen separate streets in Bristol noting both the quantity of houses and the number of male and female inhabitants in each. He found 703 houses with a total of 1823 male and 2185 female inhabitants, and from this he calculated that there was an average of five and one-sixteenth people to a house in Bristol. His method was commendable but his arithmetic poor, for he should have arrived at 5.7 persons per house. Altogether he found 6,570 inhabited houses and 384 empty houses in Bristol, Clifton, and Bedminster. This would have given Bristol approximately 37,449 people in 1775. Multiplying Cole's estimate of houses by the same number yields a population of 32,290 in 1735. Since the latter figure does not include Bedminster and Clifton and may not take empty houses into consideration, it is difficult to make a meaning-

ful comparison. However, it does seem reasonable to maintain that population remained somewhat constant between 1735 and 1775.

The census of 1801 revealed that Bristol had lost her position as second only to London in population. This fact was anticipated by a writer in the *Gentleman's Magazine* in 1799 who also listed other important changes.

With regard to opulence and importance, Bristol has long been esteemed the second city in the Kingdom; in extent and population, however, it must yield to Birmingham; in commerce and commercial liberality to Liverpool, which is now rapidly upon the increase. The Merchants of Bristol enjoy the trade of Ireland, and of nearly the whole of North and South Wales. In exchanging commodities with the West Indies, they employ no less than seventy ships, and this is one of the most important branches of their commerce. They also traffic with Spain, Portugal, Guinea, Holland, Hamburg, Norway, Russia, America, and Newfoundland. The refinery of sugar, and the glass and soap making, are the principle manufacturers of Bristol; the woollen, and the copper and brass, manufacturers are now at an end. (LXIX, p. 1039)

Some of the contemporary writers were aware that Bristol had suffered a relative decline in a century which was marked by an enormous acceleration of economic activity in Great Britain. Few writers offered reasons for this relative decline since their primary concern was description not analysis. However, Defoe cited several encumbrances retarding the growth of Bristol early in the century.

The greatest Inconveniences of Bristol, are, its Situation, and the tenacious Folly of its Inhabitants; who by the general Infatuation, the Pretence of Freedoms and Privileges, that Corporation-Tyranny, which prevents the flourishing and Increase of many a good Town in England, continue obstinately to forbid any, who are not Subjects of their City Sovereignty, (that is to say, Freeman) to Trade within the Chain of their own Liberties; were it not for this, the City of Bristol, would before now, have swell'd and encres'd in Buildings and Inhabitants, perhaps to double the Magnitude it was formerly of.

This is evident by this one particular; There is one remarkable part of the City where the Liberties extend not at all, or but very little without the City gate. Here and no where else, they have an Accession of the New Inhabitants; and

abundance of New Houses, nay, some Streets are built, and the like 'tis probable would have been at all the rest of the Gates, if liberty had been given. As for the City itself, there is hardly room to set another House in it; 'tis so close built, except in the Square, the Ground about which is a little too Subject to the hazard of Inundations; So that People do not so freely enlarge that way. (*Tour*, II, pp. 55-56)

The less-outspoken revisionists of the eighth edition of Defoe's *Tour* attempted to dispel this image of a closed society. "All kinds of persons are free to exercise their trades and callings here, without molestation from the corporation; and if poor, they may, if they please, purchase the freedom of the city for a very moderate sum." (II, p. 239) There is probably some truth in this, but another assertion by the same editor concerning the convenience of Bristol for trade is more questionable. What Defoe was alluding to in his statement concerning the inconveniences of "situation" was, without much doubt, the inconvenience to trade brought about by the physical separation of Bristol from the sea. John Aitkin most graphically illustrated the problem in 1788.

The tide rushing with great violence and rising to a vast height in these narrow rivers, brings vessels of considerable burthen to the quay of Bristol which extends along the inner shores of the Froom and the Avon; Here at low water they lie a-ground in the mud; which circumstances, together with various difficulties in navigating to and from the Severn, are the disadvantages under which this port labours. (*England*, p. 315)

In like manner, he outlined the further difficulties which ships encountered on entering the Severn. "The tides from St. Georges Channel, meeting with the powerful tides from the Atlantic, enter the mouths of the Severn and its tributary with a rapid influx; and, rolling on with a lofty head, received from our earliest historians the name of *Hygra*. (II, p. 162)

The Avon and the Froom—the avenues to the Severn and thence to the sea—which dominated the economic life of the city were the objects of a considerable amount of comment. One of the most celebrated observers was Alexander Pope who visited the Hotwells in 1739 to take advantage of their curative powers.

. . . then you come in sight of Bristol, the River winding at the bottom of steeper banks to the Town where you see twenty odd Pyramids smoking over the Town (which are Glasshouses) and a vast Extent of Houses red and white. You come first to the Old Walls, and over a bridge built on both

sides like London bridge, and as much crowded with a strange mixture of Seamen, women, children, loaded Horses, Asses, and Sledges with Goods dragging along, all together, without posts to separate them. From thence you come to a Key along the Old Wall with houses on both sides, and in the middle of the street, as far as you can see, hundreds of Ships, their Masts as thick as they can stand by one another, which is the oddest and most surprising sight imaginable. The street is fuller of them, than the Thames from London Bridge to Deptford, and at certain times only, the Water rises to carry them out; so that other times, a Long Street full of ships in the Middle and Houses on both sides looks like a Dream. (Sherburn ed., IV, p. 201)

The “Irish Gentleman” was more analytic and less colourful in his approach and view.

Next morning I went to the quay, but was very much surprised to find the river so very muddy, which I concluded to proceed from the heavy rain that fell the night before, but on inquiry found it was continually so. I can no better give a just idea of it than by a witty remark a young lady of my acquaintance made on her first seeing it, “that it seems as if Nature had taken a purge, and that was the operation”. The filth and dirt that floats on the top makes it very loathsome. The quays here are a prodigious height, because the tide flows so high, and commonly with so much rapidity that it surprised me. When it is quite ebbed, the masts of the ships reach to the level of the quay, and the landing of goods would be very difficult, were it not for the number of cranes which were placed all along it; and it is worth observing that one man with the greatest ease can raise a ton burden. The bridge is made of timber, and, when any ship is to pass, it opens in the middle by means of an engine on either side. (Huth ed., pp. 142-143)

Perhaps the most caustic remarks were made by Horace Walpole. “I did go to Bristol, the dirtiest great shop I ever saw, with so foul a river, that had I seen the least appearance of cleanliness, I should have concluded they washed all their linen in it, as they do at Paris.” (Lewis, *Correspondence*, X, p. 232) On the other hand, the 1769 revisionists of Defoe’s *Tour* were willing to temper their criticism.

The River is (it is true) muddy, and unseemly at low Water; nor do fishes, of any Value, care to inhabit so filthy a stream. But this is amply made up by the constant Vicissitudes of

The Continuation of the Road from  
**LONDON to BRISTOL.**

By JOHN OGILBY Esq; His Majest's Cosmographer

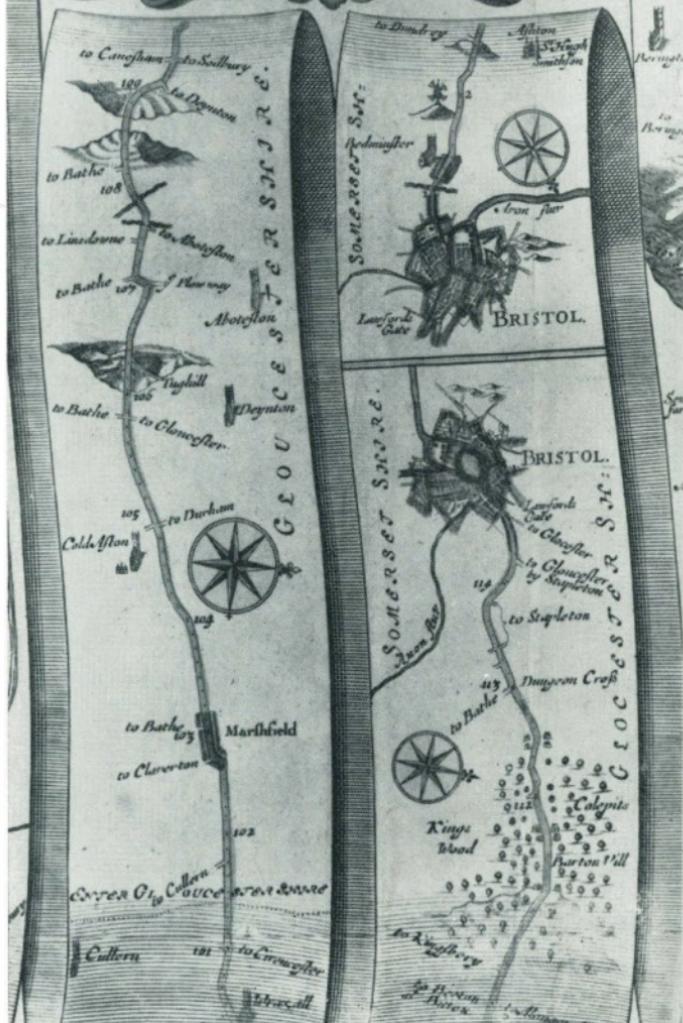
Plate 2<sup>d</sup> Containing at Marlborough &c Wales and  
& last, extending to the High Cross in BRISTOL.

Containing 39 miles & furl. 1/2.

From Marlborough to Calne 12' 5"; to Chippenham 5' 6"  
to Marlfield 9' 2", & to BRISTOL 12' 2".

Continued to Huntspill com. Somerset 24' 2. 1/2".

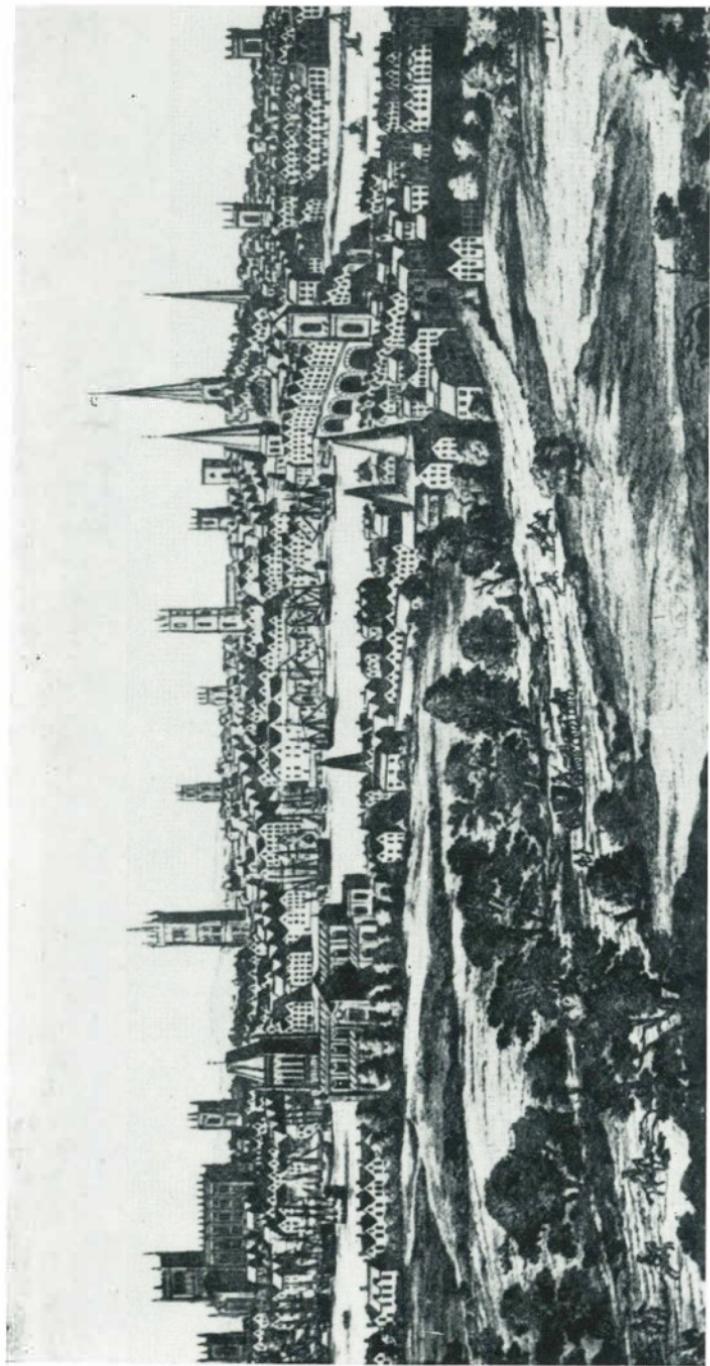
From the High Cross in BRISTOL, afford to Langford 12'  
to Axbridge 6' 2", to Huntspill 11. m.



Part of John Ogilby's *Britannia* showing the road systems of England and Wales. First published in 1675 and reprinted later.

An eighteenth century view of the approach to Bristol by the Bath Road.

*Photograph by Kevin Tindall*



the Tides, which purify the Air. When the River is quite full, the Tide is supposed to rise near 40 feet, the common Tide 30; and when the ships are carried up-and-down by the Tide, passing and repassing through the Meadows and Trees, the Prospect is indeed enchanting; especially when the Beholder is so situated as to see the Rigging of the Ships, and not the water. (II, p. 310)

The “Irish Gentleman” was so adversely impressed that he felt it necessary to mention the river again in the rather uncomplimentary summary of his opinions of Bristol.

The Town itself is but disagreeable; the streets are generally dirty and close built, except a few which lie from the main body; but what contributes more to its disadvantage is the muddy river which flows in it, and this circumstance, in my opinion, cannot be compensated by any natural advantage (Huth, ed., p. 151)

The Irishman, then, considered Bristol “disagreeable”, and Walpole called the city the “dirtiest great shop” that he had ever seen. The city did not necessarily deserve, nor did it always receive, such harsh indictments. One of the most succinct descriptions was made of Bristol by the famous Celia Fiennes who visited the city in the late seventeenth century and described it in her *Through England on a Side Saddle*.

The Buildings of ye town are pretty high, most timber work, the streets are narrow and something darkish because the roomes on ye upper storys are more jutting out, so Contracts ye streete and the light. The suburbs are better buildings and more spacious Streetes. (Griffiths ed., p. 200)

Another early visitor, John Macky, compared Bristol to Verona for its charm and pleasing aspect.

A River runs thro’ almost the Middle of it, on which there is a fine Stone Bridge. The Key maybe made the finest largest, and longest in the World, by pulling down an old House or two. Behind the Key is a very noble Square, as large as that of Soho in London: In which is kept the Custom-House; and most of the eminent Merchants, who keep their Coaches reside here. The Cathedral is on the other side of the River, on Top of the Hill; and is the meanest I have seen in England; But the Square or Green adjoining to it, hath several fine Houses, and makes, by its Situation, in my Opinion, much the pleasantest Part of the Town. There are some Churches in the City finer than the Cathedral; and

your Merchants have their little County Seats in the adjacent Eminencies; of which that of Mr. Southwell hath a very commanding Prospect both of the City, the River Severn, and the shipping that lie below. (*Journey*, II, pp. 133-134)

As the eighteenth century wore on, Bristol rather naturally expanded. This point was noted by Aitkin who explained that "Bristol is closely built: but, like other opulent towns, is now extending into suburbs by now and more airy streets," (p. 319) and by an anonymous writer in the *Gentleman's Magazine* for 1789 who went into some more detail.

The best-built parts of Bristol are the College-green, some of the streets in the neighborhood of the green, and Queen-Square. The suburb called King's-down abounds with good houses; and as this part stands pleasantly in an elevated situation, removed in some degree from the smoke and noise of the city, additions are frequently made to the number of its inhabitants. (LIX, p. 999)

The streets in the centre of the city as in all medieval towns were extremely narrow and inconvenient—a fact observed with animus by the government spy and agent, R. J. Sullivan, whose *Observations* were published in 1780.

When we consider Bristol as a place of trade and riches we are greatly surprised to find the houses so meanly built, and the streets so narrow, dirty, and ill paved. This is in some measure owing to an ill-judged parsimony; for the houses being mostly built in the same manner as those in London before the fire of 1666, with the upper stories projecting in the streets, are patched up and repaired from time to time—But this is a very impolitic measure; for besides the expenses attending the different repairs, and the low price of the rents, were a fire to happen in Bristol, it would be attended with as dreadful consequences, in proportion to the number of inhabitants, as it was in London. (pp. 91-92)

The passerby was not always safe as he walked under these ancient buildings, for their timbers and plaster often fell into the streets. Nor was the man who continually looked up safe, for he risked the chance of falling into an open cellar door, or if on horseback, of running into one of the signs which directed the illiterate to the shops and inns. This, however, was not the least of the hazards. As Defoe noted in the 1720's, "They draw all their heavy Goods here on Sleds, or Sledges without Wheels, which Kills a Multitude of Horses; and the Pavement is worn so smooth

by them, that in Wet-weather 'tis dangerous walking." (*Tour*, II, p. 437) The reasons adduced for this practice were varied. The anonymous author of *A New Present State of England* maintained that "no Carts being permitted to come there, lest as some say, the Shake occasion'd by them on the Pavement, should affect their Bristol-milk, a Cant Term for their Sherry, in the Vaults, large Quantities whereof are doubtless lodg'd there, and dispos'd of both Wholesale and Retail in its utmost Purity and Perfection." (Vol. I. 1750, p. 207) R. J. Sullivan thought that the cellars ran under the streets—which is true—but the real reason for this precaution was presented by the anonymous author of a *Complete History of Somerset*. "The streets, which are very uniform and well built, are kept very neat and free from all noiseome vapours which may infect the air, by the many subterraneous vaults and channels, (called by the citizens Goutes)." This sewer system, he went on to explain, was the reason that heavy vehicles were not allowed on the streets. (p. 270) Few others, however, agreed concerning the cleanliness of the streets.

The city fathers were well aware of the many hazards and inconveniences, and they obtained parliamentary authority for various improvements. That some improvements were made is attested by the sympathetic revisionist of the eighth edition of Defoe.

The internal and trading parts of the City are partly antique, high, irregular and projecting, and built of wood and plaster, with many houses, and some entire streets, (viz. Bridge-street, Clare-street, and Union-street,) of Brick and stone; . . . The heart of the city is rather closely built, but the streets are now much widened and improved, and several are totally rebuilt . . . .

The city has of late years been newly paved, with smooth pavements on the sides for foot-passengers, executed very neatly. It has been long lighted with lamps; but of late they have been increased, and the lighting is exceeded only in London.

The city has plenty of good water from public pumps and conduits; The most remarkable of which is in Temple-street . . . . Also the river water is brought underground into every street, and may be had in every street, and may be had in every house for an annual payment. There are vaults or common sewers . . . and perhaps there is not a house which has not a communication with

the main sewers; a provision for cleanliness, not so universal in any city in the world. Carts and Waggons are used here as in other places, with some sledges, or drays. (II, pp. 239-240)

Despite the improvements (which may have been exaggerated by this edition of the *Tour*) visitors still spoke of the narrowness of the streets. During a visit to Bristol in 1775, Thomas Hutchinson, a prominent American and later a loyalist, echoed the old view. "I had formed a pretty just idea from the long-continued accounts of people who had been there, but it rather fell short: the houses are meaner, the streets narrower and dirtier, and except the buildings in three or four small squares (or rather some of these buildings), and some of the Company Halls, there are no elegant houses, scarcely fit for a first-rate tradesman To live in." (Hutchinson ed., I, p. 346) It would, indeed, appear that Hutchinson found Bristol wholly unattractive, yet two years later this same visitor wrote:

Yesterday took a full view of Bristol from Brandon Hill, where they say Cromwell erected his battaries and beat down their houses. I think, take in all circumstance, and I should prefer living there to any place in England. The manners and customs of the people are very like those of the people of New England, and you might pick out a set of Boston Selectmen from any of their churches. (Hutchinson, II, p. 148)

Though the basis of the judgment differed, this does present an interesting and strange contrast. Others, given the same opportunity to visit Bristol a second time, might well have revised their opinions.

Perhaps because the streets were narrow, they appeared to many of the observers to swarm with people. Pope who had described the bridge—which was replaced in the 1760's—as "crowded with a strange mixture" of people and animals, also commented that "The streets are as crowded as London, but the best Image I can give you of it is, Tis as if Wapping and Southwark were ten-times as big, or all their people run into London." (Sherburn ed., IV, pp. 204-205)

To add to the confusion and crowds which were evident throughout the city were the hawkers, peddlers, and farmers who cried their wares through Bristol. During the two annual fairs and during market days ably described by one of the local historians, Barrett, the crowds were even greater.

Butter remarkable good and flesh meat, ox beef, veal and mutton, the best of every kind, together with all the produce of the kitchen-garden in great abundance, are to be had at the markets, held every Wednesday and Saturday, behind the Exchange in Union-Street; and fish at the Fish-market twice a week, Wednesday and Friday, in Union Street, besides the salmon, cod, mackerel, herring, plaice, flounders, oysters, sprats, etc. brought to the Back during the season. A market is also held on the Back every other Wednesday, where the Welch boats, arriving at spring tides, discharge the produce of their country for sale; fine salt-butter, poultry of all kinds, roasting pigs and geese ready for the spit; fruit as apples and pears, etc. The great brewhouses and malthouses, the bakers and cornfactors, are furnished with corn and flour by water carriage from the West Country and the fertile vale of Evesham, and the counties of Hereford, Monmouth, and Worcester, which is landed on St. Austin's wharf, at the head of the Quay, out of the trows; or on the Back, where convenient markethouses are built for securing it when landed from the weather, and there exposed to sale every spring tide:—here are also landed great quantities of cyder. Besides these, there was a corn-market in Wine-street, where corn was brought by the neighboring farmers for sale, now converted into a cheese-market; and a hay-market was established in Broadmead in the year 1786, every Tuesday and Friday. The great market for fat and lean cattle, sheep, (great droves of which come in from Wales) is held in St. Thomas-street every Thursday, and is much frequented also by the woollen manufacturers at the season of the year for the purchase of wool, the wool-hall being in this street. (*History*, pp. 102-103)

Another contemporary explained that “all are in a hurry, running up and down with cloudy looks, and busy faces, loading, carrying and unloading goods and merchandizes of all sorts, from place to place . . .” (*A Complete History of Somerset*, pp. 27-28)

Even the merchants contributed to this confusion. This was the case despite the fact that a commodious exchange was completed by 1742. The “Irish Gentleman” who made his trip in 1752 left a description of the economic centre of Corn Street.

I went to the Exchange, very neat and well built, modelled from the Royal Exchange in London, but not near as to the dimensions of that pile. On the entrance is a coffee house on one side, and a tavern on the other. I was surprised to see most of the merchants assembled in the street transacting their affairs, and a very few within. As the Exchange hath

been newly finished and the people never before used to it, the London merchants say, "the Bristol hogs have built a sty, but cannot find the way into it." (Huth, ed., p. 144)

The merchants may not have been adjusted to their new centre, but they were used to being called hogs. Even twenty-eight years later, another visitor explained that by their meeting in the streets the merchants were "constantly exposed to the inclemency of the weather." (Sullivan, p. 92)

To add to the inconveniences suffered by the Bristolians, the glass-houses, which Pope had described as "twenty odd Pyramids smoking over the town," kept "the city, from the continual smoke arising from them, being constantly darkened and in dirt, while the inhabitants are almost suffocated with noxious effluvia." (Sullivan, p. 92) A local poet of questionable talent shed some light on this problem in a number of *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal*.

Bristol can boast of as many pleasant Walks and Rides for Airing in its Inviron, as almost any City: — And happy it is for such a populous Place to have such pleasant Hills and Downs in its Neighborhood — Here the Industrious Tradesmen after breathing the impure Air of a close Street, may sometimes retire with little Loss of Time, and Snuff the Flagrant Gales, and open his Air-pipes nigh chock'd with noisome Exhalations . . . . Here the labouring Mechanic accompanied with his Faithful Wife and little Pratlers take their Sunday's Walk, of Summer Evening Excursion . . . a perfect Terras, thrown up as it were by Art, for people to walk there and overlook the smokey Town. Kingsdown delightful spot is already begun to be dug up . . . . (Dec. 13, 1760)

The author was complaining about the loss of another green belt—a problem which is all too common today. The digging to which he alluded was elaborated on in the same paper a month later.

Each petty Tradesman here must have his Seat,  
And vainly thinks the Height will make him great:  
But little things look less the more they rise:  
So wrens may mount until they look flies.

Haste Brewer e'er Too late, and choose thy Spot  
Sell off thy Soot, and build thy Kingsdown Cot.  
Come hither Pedlars, quit your dusty stalls.  
Here build your Seats, on rise your gardenwalls  
And when you've built it e'er call It what you will  
'Twill not be Kingsdown then, but Pedlars Hill.  
(January 24, 1761)

The contemporary view of Bristol, then, was not altogether flattering. It remains to discuss the opinions expressed by contemporaries of the people who lived in it. Bristol, like London, was essentially a two and not a three-class society in ordinary eighteenth-century terms. There was a middle-class and a lower-class, but the city could not boast of a noble or an aristocratic class. The organization of society was, more simply, commercial not aristocratic. Alexander Pope pointed this out in a letter to his friend Martha Blount: "The City of Bristol itself is a very unpleasant place and no civilized company in it," and he continued, "Only the Collector of the Customs would have brought me acquainted with the Merchants, of whom I hear no great Character." (Sherburn, IV, p. 204) One might assume that he was equating aristocracy and civilized man.

This make-up of society is further revealed by *Sketchley's Bristol Directory*, the first part of which was "An Alphabetical list of the Merchants, Tradesmen, Manufacturers, Captains of Ships, Custom House and Excise Officers, and every other person of note in Bristol and its environs." The leaders of this society were the merchants of whom Bristol was proud. Andrew Hooke, a local publisher, reflected a widely held opinion by noting that, "if we indulge a free Enquiry into the true Source and Origin of Honour, we shall find that Commerce is the sole foundation, and Solid Basis that supports not only secondary Dignities, but even Royalty itself." (*Bristolia*, p. 111)

However, Pope was unimpressed and so were others. One of the most scathing indictments was made by the editors of the 1742 edition of Defoe's *Tour*. After discussing the narrowness of the streets, they go on to say:

... we might mention also another Narrow, that is, the Minds of the Generality of its People; for, let me tell you, the Merchants of Bristol, tho' very rich, are not like the Merchants of London; The latter may be said (as of old of the Merchants of Tyre) to vie with the Princes of the Earth; whereas the former, being rais'd by good fortune, and Prizes taken in the Wars, from Masters of Ships, and blunt tars, have inbib'd the Manners of those rough Gentlemen so strongly, that they transmit it to their Descendents, only with a little more of the Sordid than is generally to be found among British Sailors; and I would advise the rich ones among them, if they would be a little more polite and generous, than they usually are, to travel, but not out of England neither, I mean only to London (that is, from the second great Trading town to the first); and

they will see Examples worth their Imitation, as well for Princely Spirit, as upright and generous Dealings. (*Tour*, II, pp. 269-270)

Pope and the editors of this edition of Defoe were not alone in their vilifying appraisals. The "Irish Gentleman" noted of Bristolians that, "Their Souls are engrossed by lucre, and [they] are very expert in affairs of merchandize; but as to politeness, it is a thing banished from their republic as a contagious distemper." (Huth, p. 151). Thomas Cox writing much earlier made a similar judgment.

It is very populous; but the People give up themselves to Trade so entirely, that nothing of the Politeness and Gaiety of Bath is to be seen here . . . for the Trade of many Nations is drawn hither by the Industry and the Opulence of the People. This makes them remarkably insolent to Strangers, as well as ungrateful to Benefactors, both naturally arising from being bred, and become rich by Trade, as (to use their own Phrase) to care for no Body, but whom they can gain by; but yet this ill-bred Temper hath produced one good Effect, which our Laws have not yet been able to do, and that is, the utter extirpation of Beggars. (*Magna Britannia*, 1727, IV. pp. 744-745)

Cox did find a redeeming feature, but Samuel Johnson's friend, Richard Savage, was not so charitable.

Boast swarming vessels, whose plebeian state  
Owes not to merchants but mechanics freight.  
Boast nought but pedlar-fleets — in war's alarms,  
Unknown to glory, as unknown to arms.  
Boast thy base Tolsey, and the turn-spit dogs,  
Thy Halliers horses and thy human hogs;  
Upstarts and mushrooms, proud relentless hearts;  
Thou blank of sciences! thou dearth of arts!  
Such foes as learning once was doom'd to see;  
Huns, Goths, and Vandals were but types of thee.

Proceed, great Bristol, in all-righteous ways,  
And let one Justice heighten yet thy praise;  
Still spare the catamite and swinge the whore,  
and be, whate'r Gomorrah was before.

(Anon., *Savage*, II., p. 235).

These vitriolic words, it must be admitted, were written while Savage was in Bristol's Bridewell, but even so they cannot be ignored in light of so much corroboration.

All of these comments were made in roughly the first part or half of the century, and much of the criticism had its origins in the contention that Bristolians were uncultured. A Pope or a



An eighteenth century view of the High Cross, the Cathedral and the Church of St. Augustine the Less (now demolished)

From a print supplied by Messrs. Frost and Reed Ltd.

The following is a prophesy of the High Cross at Burstow, written in Latin, and now discovered in a manuscript of the year 1390, in the library of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Denmark. It is a prediction of the destruction of the church of St. Augustine, and the conversion of the people of Burstow to the Romish religion.

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The first American consulate in England, No. 37 Queen Square. In 1797 the Polish patriot Thaddeus Kosciuszko after his release from St. Petersburg Prison and while en route for the U.S.A. was a guest here of Consul Vanderhorst and received a great ovation at this house.

*Photograph by Reece Winstone*

Savage in particular were interested in the cultural attainments of any society, and a commercial Bristol rather naturally disappointed them. However, within the years between 1740 and 1780, there were significant improvements which might have pleased those who viewed Bristol as a cultural desert. Many of these improvements, it should be noted, were brought about jointly for the benefit of Bristolians and visitors to the Hotwell, which was brought within the confines of Bristol by 1778.

One source of enjoyment shared by both the visitors and the inhabitants was the Jacob's Well Theatre which had its origins early in the century. Located between Bristol and the Hotwells at the foot of Brandon Hill, the Theatre was inconvenient for Bristolians, and the walk to and fro was fraught with danger especially on those nights when the moon did not shine. Aware of these dangers and awakening to new cultural demands, the Bristolians constructed the King Street Theatre in 1766 amidst heated controversy. The editors of *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal* expressed their dissatisfaction over the prospect in verse, two lines of which are enough to reveal the substance of their argument.

Newgate enlarge! . . Yes, Quick extend its Walls; A large Play-house loudly for it calls; . . . (June 21, 1766).

And the constant visitor John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, elaborated on this view in a letter to the Mayor and Corporation of Bristol.

The endeavors lately used to procure subscriptions for building a new play house in Bristol have given us not a little concern; and that on various accounts; not barely as most of the present stage entertainments sap the foundation of all religion, as they naturally tend to efface all traces of piety and seriousness out of the minds of men; but as they are peculiarly hurtful to a trading city, giving a wrong turn to youth especially, gay, trifling, and directly opposite to the spirit of industry and close application to business; and, as drinking and debauchery of every kind are constant attendants on these entertainments, with indolence, effeminancy, and idleness, which affect trade in an high degree. (Telford, IV, p. 279)

Unfortunately, commentators on Bristol did not write about the new theatre at any length. Only the 1778 edition of Defoe's *Tour* mentions that "It is common to see upwards of 100 carriages at the doors of the theatre or concert-room." (II, p. 240)

However, other social and cultural changes were made and some of them did draw comment. By 1778 Bristol could boast a new assembly room, a Vauxhall, and a grotto of some interest. Prior to 1756 Bristol did not have a formal assembly room, though

various company halls and a converted playhouse near St. Augustine Back were often used for that purpose. When queried about the latter, a contemporary responded, "Twas a mighty shabby concern I assure ye." (Smith, Biographical Memoires, B.R.I. II, f. 290) However, it was noted in *A New Present State of England* in 1750 that the Bristolians had "begun to improve the city by several noble edifices, more particularly their Assembly-Room, on College-Green, it is to be hop'd that their Minds will in Time take a happier Turn, and the more considerable Part of them will be convinc'd, that Politeness is no ways incompatible with Trade and Commerce." (I, p. 207) It is not easy to determine which assembly room the author is alluding to, but in 1756 the New Musick Room on Prince Street was opened with the presentation of Handel's *Messiah*. That the New Musick Room had the desired effect is open to question. The eighteenth century poet, Thomas Chatterton, presented a rather uncomplimentary view in verse.

A mean assembly room, absurdly built,  
Boasted one gorgeous lamp of copper gilt;  
With farthing candles, chandiliers of tin,  
And services of water, rum, and gin.  
There in the dull solemnity of wigs,  
The dancing bears of commerce murder jigs;  
Here dance the dowdy belles of crooked trunk,  
And often, very often, reel home drunk;  
Here dance the bucks with infinite delight,  
And club to pay the fiddlers for the night.  
While Broderip's hum-drum symphony of flats  
Rivals the harmony of midnight cats.

(*Kew Gardens*, Chatterton, pp. 355-356)

Of course, it must be recalled that the ill-fated Chatterton had been rejected by Bristol.

The New Vauxhall which was opened in 1751 was visited by the "Irish Gentleman" who was not unimpressed.

In the evening we went to a pretty garden near the Hotwells, which they call Vauxhall. There are some booths and pleasant arbors, hung with some globe lamps, etc. an orchestra wherein were a good band of music. There was no company here this night, which rendered it very disagreeable and several times after but very few. The Poor Man who owned it was at a great expense to keep it in order, but in a short time after was obliged to decamp. (Huth ed., p. 148)

The gardens did, indeed, disappear from the Bristol scene for some years, but a New Vauxhall was constructed in 1776, and,

if we are to believe the local journals, it was an immediate success. *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal* reported an attendance of over two thousand on the first night alone.

It is impossible to determine how popular the grotto owned by Mr. Goldney, a local merchant, was, but it was popular enough to attract Samuel Curwen, another American Loyalist, who spent some part of his exile in Bristol.

On 'change met my countryman Mr. Joseph Waldo, who procured tickets for our admission to Mr. Goldney's grotto at Clifton . . . we were soon admitted, and, attended by the gardner, were conducted through gravel-walks, kept in the nicest order, the whole bearing the appearance of care and industry; it is on a moderate scale, but well filled with orange and lemon trees, etc., and a small piece of water abounding in gold and silver fish, supplied from a natural fountain so lofty that a fire-engine is erected at one end of the terrace; the stream runs underground for a distance and discharges itself through an urn on which a neptune rests with his trident. The ground between it and the engine is made rough, scraggy, and woody, to resemble a wilderness, which I passed going through the main walk. We arrived at the door of the grotto, situated under the terrace; the object that presented itself to our view was a lion in a sitting posture, and behind, in a dark cave, a lioness, the latter so like life that I could hardly persuade myself to the contrary. The form of the grotto is octangular, its roof semi-circular, having a dome with a round window in the centre; the diameter about twenty feet on each side, from the door in front to the mouth of the cave in which the lioness is sitting; to the right and left of the entrance the roof is supported by pillars; covered as its roof and sides are with a variety of shells, stones, spars, petrifications, etc., the mountain, even the bowels of the earth and the bottom of the sea, seem to have been pillaged to furnish materials to adorn this curious subtertraneous recess. On the left hand, beyond the dome and under a rough cragged stone arch, is a small quadrangular stone basin of water supplied by small streams, issuing through almost perfect deception ever saw. On the door was a miniture of a female face with a seemingly broken glass covering it, in the same style and manner, and producing a like effect. From hence we ascended the terrace-walk four hundred feet in length, the front of the garden raised forty feet supported by a brick wall; the rear bounded by a border of flowers, and behind a shrubbery of lofty trees. On the right is an octangular structure ending in a dome eighteen feet in diameter, with seats all round, and

having as many windows as it has sides, which affords as many prospects, except on the side of the garden, where they are darkened, yielding three delightful perspectives. (Ward ed. p. 154)

With all of these changes, Alexander Pope might have been more impressed had he visited Bristol in 1780 rather than in 1739. As the 1778 edition of Defoe's *Tour* noted.

There are many genteel houses of entertainment all about the city, with neat walks and gardens, and very good accommodations. Convenience and elegance are now attended to at Bristol, and it affords every gratification a reasonable person can desire. (II, p. 241)

The same revisionists also attempted to dispel the unhappy image of the people at Bristol which was reflected in the writing of so many of the early visitors and writers.

Its gentry, merchants, and capital traders, are as polite, and superb in their town and country houses, equipages, servants, and amusements as any in the kingdom. And they cannot well be otherwise, with Bath on the one side, and the Hotwells, a resort of nobility and gentry, under their eye. Its shopkeepers are remarkable for their activity, industry, and obliging upright, and punctual behaviour in their business. Literature and genteel education are much cultivated in Bristol; and it abounds with agreeable women, whose mode of dress is universally approved. People of rank and education here, as everywhere else, pronounce with propriety; but some of the bourgeois speak a broad dialect, much worse than the common people in the metropolis, though they are not willing to acknowledge it. (II, p. 239)

It will be recalled that Thomas Hutchinson was also very much impressed with the people of Bristol when he made his visit in 1777. However, these seem to have been minority opinions; Samuel Curwen, who liked Bristol well enough to spend some part of his exile in it, reflected the old view in his diary in 1778.

Had an hour's conversation with a stranger on 'change; a rare event, people in England being greatly indisposed to join with unknown persons. The Bristolians are, however, remarkable for early enquiries into the character of all strangers, from commercial motives, and soon fasten on all worth making a property of, if practicable; all others, of how great estimation soever, are in general neglected. This city is remarkable for sharp dealings; there runs a proverb, "one Jew is equal to two Genoese, one Bristolian to two Jews." (Ward, ed., p. 154)

R. J. Sullivan was no more generous in his appraisal in 1780, nor was G. Parker, a lecturer, soldier, and actor, who visited Bristol in the same year.

I barely entered into London, in order to fix my route, which I determined should be to Bristol, where I got at the time of the fair, and found it almost impossible to obtain lodgings for love or money.

My fears of large towns were justified in Bristol; for after repeated struggles in the course of near six months, I was unable to procure more than three Audiences, from whom the whole amount of my receipts were only seven pounds four shillings: So that had it not been for the assistance of some friends, it must have been over with me.—

I often expostulated with myself on this impossibility of inducing an Audience of any consequences to visit my lecture; but what right had I to expect being attended to where Savage died neglected in a gaol, and whence Chatterton fled to perish prematurely in London . . . . (*View*, II, pp. 260-261)

These again are the bitter words of a thwarted artist, and it is apparent that George Parker was unattractive to audiences in many cities, for despite the patronage of Oliver Goldsmith and Samuel Johnson, he died in poverty. It might be mentioned here that both Dr. Johnson and Boswell visited the city in order to investigate the Chatterton papers. Unfortunately the only registered response of either man was about the inn in which they stayed. Dr. Johnson said that it was so bad that even Boswell wished he was back in Scotland, but it will be remembered that Johnson had a very poor opinion of Scotland.

The writer in the *Gentleman's Magazine* of 1799 concurred. Here, as I was examining one of the small brazen pillar tablets, which are placed before the entrance into the Exchange, I observed on the border this inscription.

Nemo sibi nascitur

[roughly translated; no man is an island unto himself.]

A motto that was the more remarkable, as the general character of the people of Bristol, and particularly of the merchants, though they have this memorial so continually before their eyes, is far from being correspondent. The latter, notwithstanding this elegant structure has been erected for the reception at so great an expence, always remain on tolzey, jealous of the increase of each other's affairs. But, though innumerable instances may be adduced in confirmation of this characteristic, it is not here intended to insinuate that Bristol is incapable of giving birth to men of liberal sentiment. (LXIX, pp. 1039-1040)

Even John Wesley who had been a frequent visitor for fifty-one years made a devastating judgment in a letter to a friend.

I often wonder at the people of Bristol. They are so honest, yet so dull; 'tis scarce possible to strike any fire into them. (Telford, VIII, p. 198)

The anonymous writer of an article in the *Monthly Magazine* in 1799 offered a reason for Bristol's bad press.

Perhaps there is no place in England where public and social amusements are so little attended to as here. From this circumstance, the inhabitants have been stigmatized with a want of taste, and described as the sordid devotees of Plutos. Another, and more plausible reason may be alleged for this singularity: no place contains, in proportion to its inhabitants so many dissenters. (June 1, 1799)

Defoe had noticed that there were "seven Meeting-Houses, two Presbyterian, one Independent, two Quakers, one Baptist: also one or two other Meetings not to be nam'd." (*Tour*, 1724, II, p. 515) There was also a great increase occasioned by the Wesleyan additions during the century, but this does not mean that the author was necessarily correct in his assumption.

The bulk of this criticism was, of course, directed towards the middle-class inhabitants of the city. The poor not only escaped criticism but also escaped notice. To be sure, there were lists of charitable projects and foundations. Bristol was justly famous for its care of the socially deprived, and John Howard, the prison reformer, described the jails in detail—crime being a peculiar province of the poor — but otherwise there was little mention of this aspect of life. Poverty and suffering were altogether too common in the eighteenth century to warrant special notice. Furthermore, the literate were writing about the literate for the literate.

If one were to judge the contemporary view of Bristol by the sheer weight of evidence, one would find the image of the city to be an uncomplimentary one throughout the century. The reader may not find this image congenial if his Bristol ancestors made up this eighteenth century population, nor will he find it all accurate. One might justly ask if many of the writers were prepared to find Bristol unpleasant. Travellers of all periods of history have had a propensity to be critical. A Pope might expect too much of a provincial city, and a Hutchinson used to wide and airy streets in the new American cities would rather naturally be adversely impressed by the narrowness of the medieval streets. Though one might indeed question the validity and recognize the prejudices of the writers, one cannot change what the world was reading about Bristol. As uncongenial as it may have been, it must stand.

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